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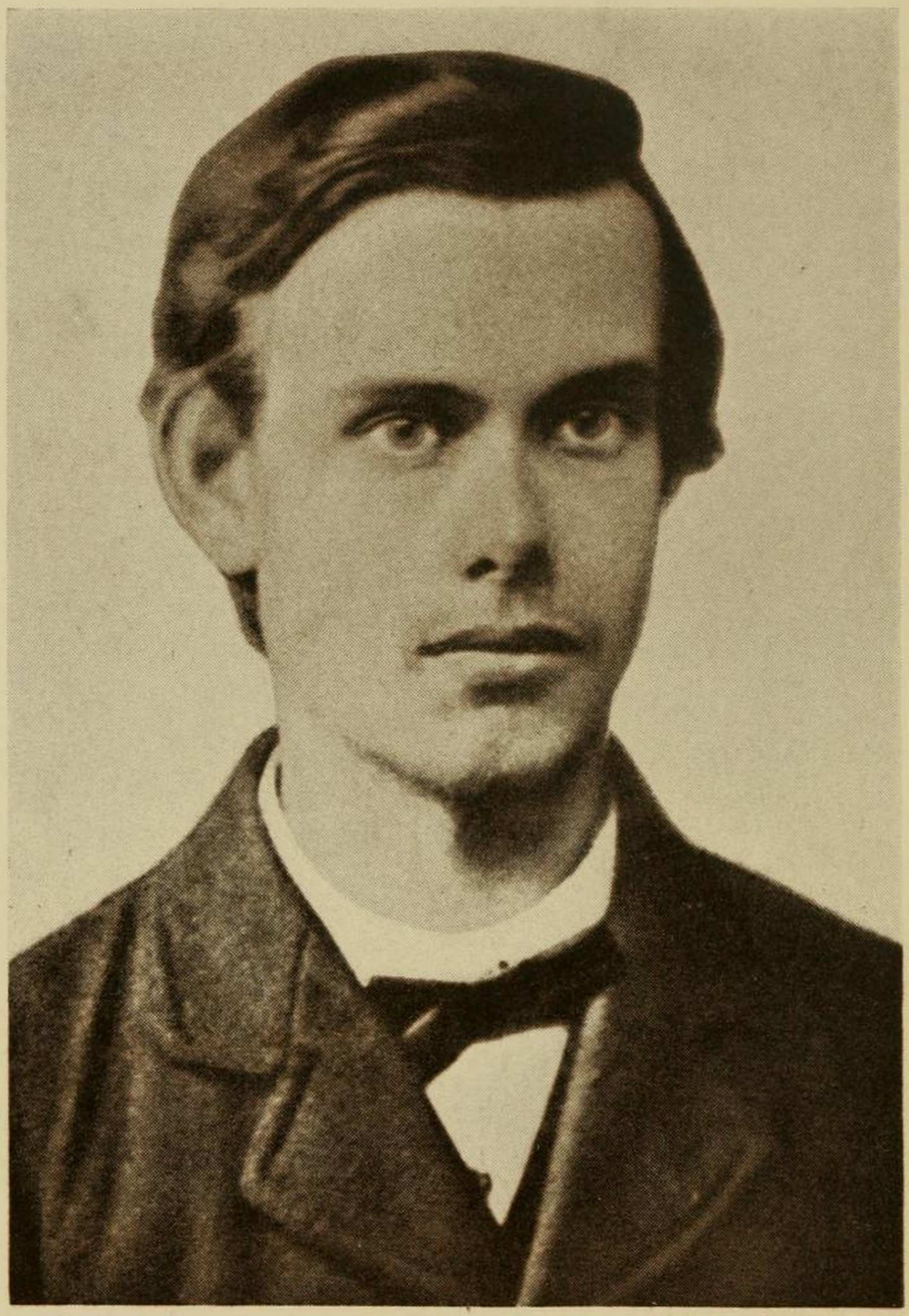
FRANCIS THOMPSON

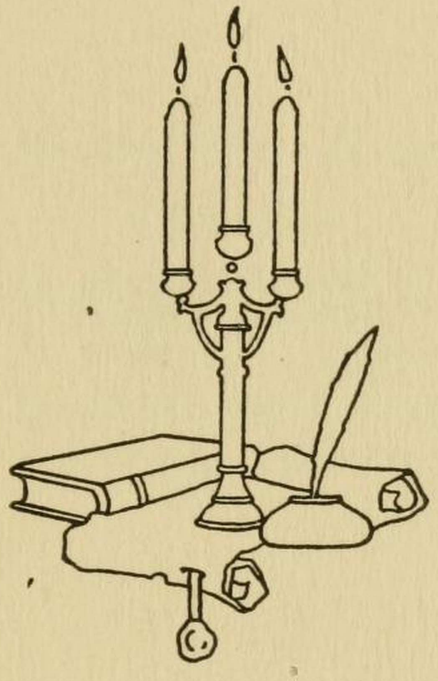
Essays by Benjamin Fisher



Francis Thompson
in 1877

FRANCIS THOMPSON

ESSAYS



BY BENJAMIN FISHER

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no. 1.

To Our Dear Sister

Jennie

whose life has been to
us a constant inspira-
tion in all that is good
and beautiful and true.

PREFACE

Sometime in the summer of 1910 the author of these essays chanced to obtain a volume of Francis Thompson's poems which had then been recently published in America. He became greatly interested in the work of Thompson and read and studied the poems with much enthusiasm. It happened that a few months later he found Thompson's essay on Shelley which had then but recently been put into book form and published in the United States, and this was read with especial delight. The Shelley essay prompted the writing of articles similar in form on the life and works of Thompson, and in the fall of 1910 the two essays here published were written, the author at the time intending them for magazine publication. When they were completed, however, he became interested in the final preparation of his first book of poems, "Life Harmonies," and in the meantime the essays on Thompson were laid aside for future use.

The works of Thompson although receiving recognition in England, the home of the poet, were known to but few in America at this time,

and it was the author's hope that the articles might to some extent be the means of awakening a still greater interest and appreciation in the life and works of Thompson in this country; and it is believed that although Thompson is known now to many, yet the publication of the essays may be the means of bringing to others a realization of the beauty and greatness of Thompson's literary work, as well as constituting in themselves a contribution to good literature.

It is hoped that the book may fall into the hands of some who do not even know of Thompson and who have not read the marvelous works of his genius, and especially for the benefit of these, it has been thought well to include a brief biographical sketch of Francis Thompson, and by way of added interest to the volume, a brief biography of the author.

Clarence A. Fisher

Canton, Ohio
May, 1917

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Biographical Sketch of Francis Thompson

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH
of
FRANCIS THOMPSON

Francis Thompson was born at Preston in Lancashire, England, on the 16th day of December, 1859. His father, Dr. Charles Thompson, was a physician who practised his profession there and later at Ashton-under-Lyne.

Very early in life he began to read much poetry; his early reading being mostly from Shakespeare, Scott and Coleridge. Later we find him a constant companion of Milton, Shelley and Shakespeare. In 1870 he was sent to Ushaw, a college near Durham. Here he enjoyed a fortunate freedom—the full opportunity of reading the classics. Even during his college life his extreme sensitiveness, like that of Shelley's youth, made him happiest when alone. He studied for the priesthood but in his nineteenth year being found unfitted, he was advised to give up the idea much to the disappointment of his parents.

Leaving Ushaw he went to Owens College at Manchester to qualify for his father's pro-

fession, that of medicine, and although distinguishing himself in Greek and classic work he had no success as a medical student. He says, of this period in his life: "I hated my scientific and medical studies and learned them badly. Now (in after life) even that bad and reluctant knowledge has grown priceless to me."

While at Manchester he would go to the libraries and to the galleries and museums, thus perhaps unconsciously fitting himself for his after work. Failing in his college examinations on more than one occasion and broken down with a nervous illness, like De Quincey he became addicted to the use of opium. He went to London carrying all his wealth with him, which consisted of two volumes, one in either pocket, "Aeschylus" and "Blake." However, there he found but little employment, had no money, suffered intensely all the pangs of hunger and dismay, and finally a complete mental and physical wreck, he was for the time being rescued by a Mr. McMaster who took him into his employ in a boot-shop and secured clothes and lodging for him. Francis remained

some months with Mr. McMaster and it was at this time that he sent several manuscripts to the magazines. One of these manuscripts was sent to Wilfrid Meynell, editor of "Merry England."

He left what little employment he had and again became an outcast on the streets of London, where in extreme despair he was found and befriended by a "girl of the streets" who gave him what aid she might until his later rescue by Wilfrid Meynell.

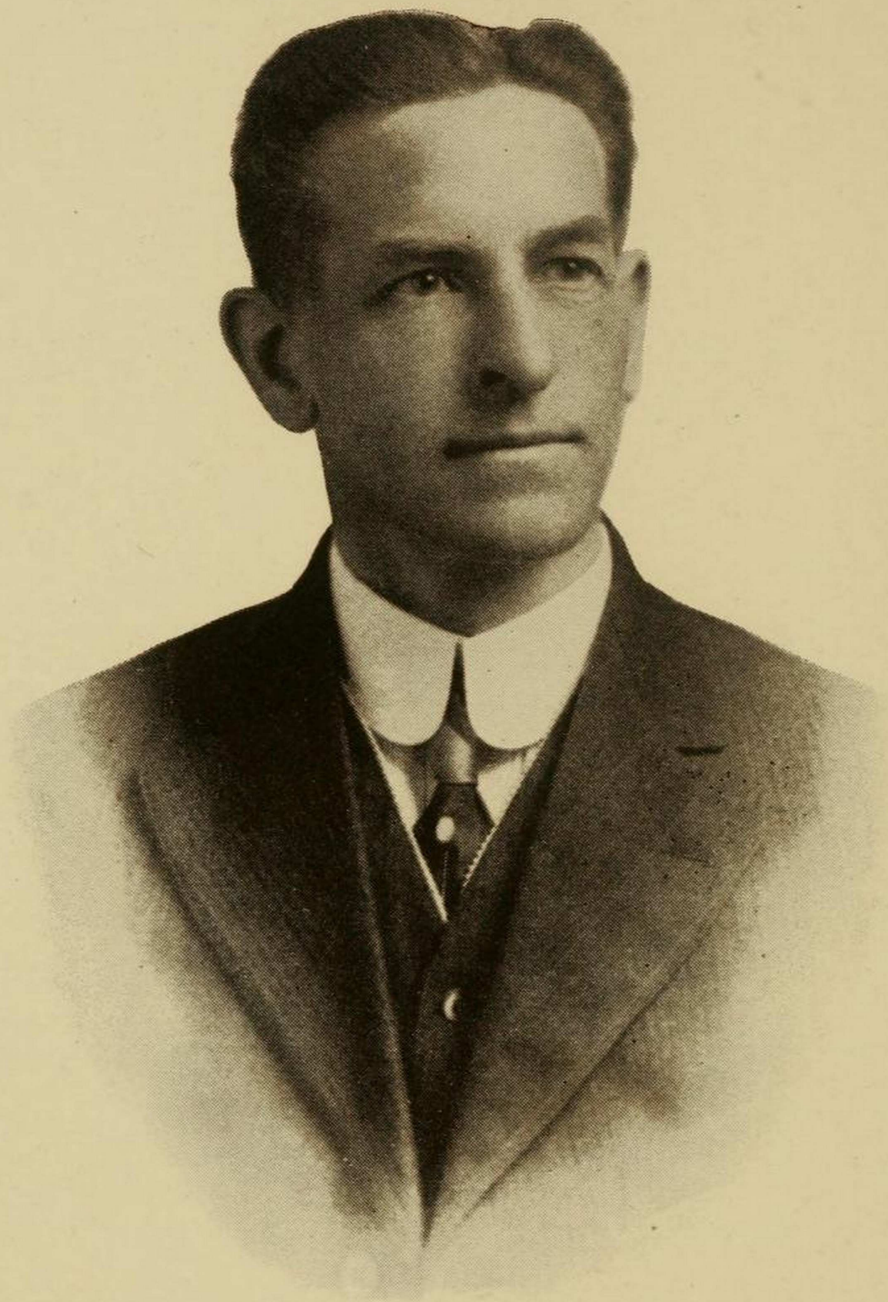
In the Spring of 1888 Mr. Meynell found Thompson and befriended him; and through his influence and that of his wife, Alice Meynell, Francis was rescued from the streets of London and started on his great literary way which soon brought fame. His "Poems" published in 1893 ran through several editions receiving praise from the reviewers and from Browning; then followed "Sister Songs" in 1895, and "New Poems" in 1897.

He had suffered greatly from bodily disease and melancholy, especially toward the last, and said upon the publication of "New Poems":

"Though my aims are unfulfilled, my place insecure, many things warn me that with this volume, I am probably closing my brief poetic career." His biographer, Everard Meynell, tells us that Thompson never lost confidence in the satisfaction that his poetry was immortal; and this must have been his constant inspiration during these troublesome times.

Thompson's early experiences had broken down his health and ten days before his death he was sent to the Hospital of St. John and St. Elizabeth in London, and there at the age of forty-eight, on November 13, 1907, he passed away at dawn.

Everard Meynell in the closing paragraphs of his admirable "Life of Francis Thompson" beautifully says: "Suffering alone, he escaped alone, and left none strictly bound on his account. He left his friends to be busy not with his ashes but his works." Wilfrid Meynell wrote, "Devoted friends lament him no less for himself than for his singing. But let none be named the benefactor of him who gave to all more than any could give to him. He made all men his debtors, leaving to those who loved him the memory of his personality, and to English poetry an imperishable name."



1916

Biographical Sketch of the Author
Benjamin Fisher

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

of

THE AUTHOR

Benjamin Franklin Fisher was born at Steubenville, Ohio, on the 22nd day of December, 1873. His father was Dr. Benjamin H. Fisher, a physician and surgeon who successfully practised his profession there for many years. Dr. Fisher served as a surgeon in the Civil War, and continued in his profession until his death in November, 1906. He was married in early life to Elizabeth Rittenhouse who was born at Hopedale in Jefferson County, Ohio. Benjamin was one of four children, Bartley, Jennie, Benjamin and Clarence, the first of whom died at the age of six years, Jennie and Clarence still surviving.

Benjamin's early education was obtained in the public schools of Steubenville, where he was graduated from the High School in 1892. He then went to Depauw University at Greencastle, Indiana, and pursued collegiate studies there for about two years. His first literary

work was begun at this time in some brief articles and poems which appeared in the college publications. Leaving college in 1895 he made an extended tour of Europe, travelling almost continuously for a year, giving much attention to the study of foreign languages and art. Returning home, he entered Oberlin College where he continued his studies, and later in 1899 returned to Depauw University. In all of his college work especial attention and study was given to literature and the fine arts. Somewhat later he made another tour of Europe, contributing while abroad, and after his return, articles to various American magazines and newspapers.

It was following the last tour that he seriously began his poetical work. Within a few years' time, although engaged in business affairs, he wrote a considerable number of poems intending them for later book publication. The poems of this period were, however, laid aside by reason of the requirements and time needed for business affairs, and only a few of them found their way into the published collection in 1914.

In 1903 he made a tour of Mexico into the far interior, and somewhat later the entire western section of the United States, contributing while on these tours several articles to magazines and newspapers. His father and mother to whom he was greatly attached died in 1906. Shortly afterward he became president of a manufacturing company at Loudonville, Ohio, where he remained in business until his death. On July 19, 1915, he was married to Miss Cleo Redd of Loudonville. During the latter years of his life almost every moment possible was devoted to his poetical works, and in the early Spring of 1914 his first collection of poems was published under the title "Life Harmonies."

He immediately set out to complete other works in which he had been interested for years, and just prior to his death had completed for publication a number of poems and prose works. In the midst of these labors he was stricken down by a sudden illness, and unexpectedly passed away on Thursday, the 26th day of October, 1916. On a beautiful autumn day, Sunday, the 29th of October, he was buried in the little cemetery at Loudonville.

The later years of his life were filled with little acts of kindness to those whom his charity could reach. His success in business, which came so late, was to have been only a means to the accomplishment of higher purposes in life—

"Incessant Spirit like a tireless goad,
Compelling effort to unwonted trials,
Why dost thou urge me onward o'er the road
Of weary struggle through life's mazy wiles?
With failures scorned and pleasures all subdued,
I strive and strain to reach those higher goals
Where labor shall achieve some human good—
Some influence sweet, or love in humble souls.
So, shall thy force relentless keep her sway;
E'en though I lose the common joys of life,
My heart shall triumph in some golden day,
With lives made better through my pain and strife.
Thou gracious tyrant, wield thy chast'ning goad
And drive me upward o'er thy skyey road."

"ASPIRATION", a Sonnet.

His constant companionship with Nature kept him always close to God. In death there was to him the triumph over life—

"There pride is debased, humility exalted,
suffering recompensed and sacrifice rewarded,
in the vast harmony of that universal law
'The Infinite Love of God.'"

Francis Thompson, the Poet.
An Essay

FRANCIS THOMPSON
THE POET

Genius has been called "divine inspiration" by some, simple "mind-concentration" by others; but the acknowledged failure of all arbitrary definition demands that science declare it "the physical expression of a subconscious state of psychic receptivity." Thus we cannot have power without performance or "faith without works."

In the artistic expression of Francis Thompson's conceptions we behold not the spark of genius, but the fire; not promise, but fulfillment; not a faculty for analyzation, but a power for wonder. He has had superiors in amount and variety of finished poetic production, but in those strange and beautiful heights and depths of pure poetic reach and achievement, he has had scarcely an equal in a generation.

Comparisons among great men are usually our begging justification for a failure of true comprehension or an inability of clear exposition. Thompson was like Shelley in figurative

opulence; he was like Keats in his pure sensuousness; he was like Crashaw in his metaphysical mysticism, and like Milton in his pure religious enthusiasm. He was similar, in certain traits, to many others who left to the world (of which he, like Paul, held himself to be the least) the highest expression of some beauty of thought or feeling, which alone is true art.

Yet, in native faculty and unique accomplishment, Thompson is distinctly individual—and individuality is the first mark of genius. He is comparable to another only as the violet is comparable to the rose: the petals, the stamens, the leaves are there; but the colors, the odors, the forms, and their combination into the perfect flower, are absolutely different and dissimilar. The flower of Genius is beyond measurement and comparison—almost "beyond mortal thought." With Shelley it flourished in Italian sunshine; with Milton it grew in the gloom of blindness; with Thompson it blossomed in the murk of London byways.

As we have intimated, scarcely any such production, equal in those subtle revelations of

pure poetic spontaneity, has appeared in our language in a generation, as Francis Thompson's poems, not to forget that other masterwork—the prose poem on Shelley. Professedly a Catholic, naturally a mystic, and studiously a classicist, with a sweet, unconscious inclination to the most innocent pantheism,—his was a nature strange and complicated, influenced and tempered by many rare interests, and revealed in a poetry of almost universal though moderate aspirations. Like a child of the gods, he grasps for the richest splendor of the skies; like an ardent mystic, he delves in the depths of metaphysics; like a darling of Nature, he lounges amid flowers in the sunshine; like a religious ascetic, he seeks the depths of humiliation to reach a heaven of ecstacy.

In a single poem of moderate length, "The Hound of Heaven," he touches all the chords of the spirit-harp, sounding infinite airs of feeling and thought harmonized into a symphony of rare and universal import. His was "the wayward soul" indeed, for the life of the homeless outcast was poisoned with such an utter

misery that it found no final relief even in the impulsive outbursts of absolute bitterness,—a violent struggle between faith and despair, confused with every element of sensuous delight and religious restriction.

"My freshness spent its wavering shower i' the dust;
And now my heart is as a broken fount,
Wherein tear-drippings stagnate, spilt down ever
From the dank thoughts that shiver
Upon the sighful branches of my mind.
Such is; what is to be?
The pulp so bitter, how shall taste the rind?
I dimly guess what Time in mists confounds;
Yet ever and anon a trumpet sounds
From the hid battlements of Eternity;"

from "The Hound of Heaven."

A comprehension of such "rare Effusions" requires a consideration of the poet's environment. In all the varied and wandering airs—those sky-lost songs of love and longing—the most insistent, the most piercing, the most overwhelming tone is that of sheer and utter wretchedness, felt not fancied,—the terrible hunger and want of the poet's life in London slums. If poetry of such "divine intention" could thrive in the dreary arches of the Thames, what a marvelous bloom of heavenly

perfectness might have flourished in a summer clime! The merciless cruelty of his pain, touched by some subtle magic of music-fancy, sanctified the expression of his woe "into something rich and strange,"—a solace to our own sorrow, a comfort to our own distress.

Our constant wonder is that the mournful note of torment did not become a wail of despair, or sink into common scorn or blighting disbelief. Perhaps the drugs which eased his anguish in "that nightmare-time which still doth haunt my dreams," lent to his mental sight a rarer view. Perhaps those strange, intoxicating trances brought him clearer visions, giving to his "twenty withered years"—his "mangled youth," a new heaven and a new earth. Whatever the spell, it was an enchanting wine, a bewitching potion, whether its source were physical or mental; for it made the sensitive wind-harp of his soul dumb to the storms of hatred and despair, but trembling in responsive modulation to every tender breath of gratitude and hope.

Enough, then, of this "wailful sweetness"; of "the fierce kisses of misery that hiss against

his tears"; of that deadly night when he whispered to his heart, "Now, if the end be here!" True, his poems are not always bright with sunshine—not always glad with gorgeous blossoms. His skies were often cloudy and his flowers of sombre hue. Yet, could ever noontide be more glorious, or ever earth-bloom be richer than the fitful radiance or the varied exuberance of his Verse?

To the contemplation of every phase of beauty,—the unconscious, natural, child-like worship of all things lovely, whether color or form, material or subjective, Thompson owes much of the charm of his composition. But it is the worship of the artist, not the dumb wonder of the sight-seer. It is the inspired hymn of the seraph, not the formal chant of the sycophant. Like the impassioned Greek who brought his deities down to his fireside, he knows his gods, communes with them, loves them.

His interpretations of Nature's meanings reveal not only the constant faith of the lover, but the familiar intimacy of the companion. His treatment of her was not intensely spiritual

or profoundly religious, but cordially worshipful. He views her in serious temper or watches her in playful levity. He is with her in sacred solitude or attends her most secret revels. No humor of her being or phase of her aspect escapes him; no smile or frown, no appearance or posture, save only that highest, most holy import in spiritual mystery and ideality which Shelley interprets in that exquisite lyrical poem —the "Hymn to Intellectual Liberty."

Yet how dear, how faithful his servitude, how exact his exposition of the forms and fancies of Nature's manners and moods! No English poet has so skillfully painted, with sudden dash of the brush—with rapid flash of the fancy, a thousand complete pictures each in a mere epithet or phrase,—not even the more polished, the more graceful Keats. Such astounding swiftness of delineation, such amazing variety of portrayal, flaring for an instant from the burning ardor of his imagination, bewilder us with their infinite diversity, oppress us with their overwhelming richness.

His are not the great frescoes of Raphael, his are not the great sonatas of Beethoven; but the numberless miniatures and portraits of his word-painting, the scherzos and valses of his word-music are complete if not grand, perfect if not ambitious. Idea and personification, thought and metaphor, feeling and analogy, are all blent and mingled with scenery and imagery of infinite forms and colors. His poetry is a flashing diamond of thought set in an opal-aureole of embellishment; a magnificent orchid of passion in a jungle of tropical green; a sun-burst of wisdom in a prison-cloud of splendors.

Like Keats, his philosophical mind had not developed with the sensuous. True, a metaphysical treatment of certain phases of man's relations to Nature seemed entirely spontaneous, as was every element in his expression; but the depths of philosophy he had not sought. Equally so with dramatic tendencies, of which he shows little in his work, though in life his tragic fate is terrible to contemplate. Whether the period of his poetic labors, shortened by

those last ten years of fruitless existence, if extended to ordinary length, might not have given us equal marvels in many forms, we can but sadly wonder.

Yet, constantly, as by some subtle fire at the forge of that rare imagination, he made so much of little things: and does not this faculty indicate the philosopher, who reasons the ultimate soul from the mere germ of an idea? The forlorn outcast, the companionless wanderer, for whom the world had done so little and to whom it now owes so much, vivifying the amenities of existence by dreadful contrasts, cherished in his tender sensibilities the most exquisite friendships revealed in our language. The "Sister Songs" are the highest expression of the very chastity of dispassionate love and cordial gratitude. That exalted feeling, fined by fires of torturing anguish which singed and scorched in their fury even the rare gold of his mind, arose pure as an exhalation of thought, sweet as a breath of incense from a divine censer. No poet has ever given us more sweetly innocent worship of feminine beauty and loveliness, so purged of all self-interest or undue

familiarity. His friendships were subjective, spontaneous feelings, arising like flowers touched by the spring sun's magic wand.

Indeed, spontaneity is the attribute that above all other qualities distinguishes Thompson's work. This element is revealed in his religion as well as in his imagination. His resultant or rather attendant beliefs were a strange mixture of acquired materialism, artless pantheism and orthodox theism. For the first, read that seething sneer and scoff at life and immortality in "An Anthem of Earth," the most powerful, crushing denunciation of popular faith in all English poetry:

*" * * * Now, mortal-sonlike,*
I thou hast suckled, Mother, I at last,
Shall sustenant be to thee. Here I untrammel,
Here I pluck loose the body's cerementing,
And break the tomb of life; here I shake off
The bur o' the world, man's congregation shun,
And to the antique order of the dead
I take the tongueless vows: my cell is set
Here in thy bosom; my little trouble is ended
In a little peace."

from "An Anthem of Earth."

For the second, read that pure exalted paean, radiant with richest hues of heaven—The "Ode to the Setting Sun:"

"Who made the splendid rose
Saturate with purple glows;
Cupped to the marge with beauty; a perfume-press
Whence the wind vintages
Gushes of warmèd fragrance richer far
Than all the flavorous ooze of Cyprus' vats?
Lo, in yon gale which waves her green cymar,
With dusky cheeks burnt red
She sways her heavy head,
Drunk with the must of her own odorousness;
While in a moted trouble the vexed gnats
Maze, and vibrate, and tease the noontide hush.
Who girt dissolvèd lightnings in the grape?
Summered the opal with an Irised flush?
Is it not thou that dost the tulip drape,
And huest the daffodilly,
Yet who hast snowed the lily,
And her frail sister, whom the waters name,
Dost vestal-vesture 'mid the blaze of June,
Cold as the new-sprung girlhood of the moon
Ere Autumn's kiss sultry her cheek with flame?
Thou sway'st thy sceptred beam
O'er all delight and dream,
Beauty is beautiful but in thy glance:
And like a jocund maid
In garland-flowers arrayed,
Before thy ark Earth keeps her sacred dance."

from "Ode to the Setting Sun."

For the third, read that fantastic but intense confession of the wandering, reclaimed soul—"The Hound of Heaven:"

"I triumphed and I saddened with all weather,
Heaven and I wept together,
And its sweet tears were salt with mortal mine;

Against the red throb of its sunset-heart
I laid my own to beat,
And share commingling heat;
But not by that, by that, was eased my human smart.
In vain my tears were wet on Heaven's grey cheek.
For ah! we know not what each other says,
These things and I; in sound I speak—
Their sound is but their stir, they speak by silences.
Nature, poor stepdame, cannot slake my drouth;
Let her, if she would owe me,
Drop yon blue bosom-veil of sky, and show me
The breasts o' her tenderness:
Never did any milk of hers once bless
My thirsting mouth.
Nigh and nigh draws the chase,
With unperturbèd pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy;
And past those noisèd Feet
A voice comes yet more fleet
'Lo! naught contents thee, who content'st not Me.'"

from "The Hound of Heaven."

or that praise for the rare perfection and regret at the empty hope of Shelley's "Adonais:"

"One thing prevents 'Adonais' from being ideally perfect: its lack of Christian hope. Yet we remember well the writer of a popular memoir on Keats proposing as 'the best consolation for the mind pained by this sad record,' Shelley's inexpressibly sad exposition of Pantheistic immortality:

'He is a portion of the loveliness
Which once he made more lovely, etc.'

What utter desolation can it be that discerns comfort in this hope, whose wan countenance is as the countenance of a despair? Nay, was not indeed "wanhope" the Saxon for despair? What deepest depth of agony is it that finds consolation in this immortality: an immortality which thrusts you into death, the maw of Nature, that your dissolved elements may circulate through her veins?

Yet such, the poet tells me, is my sole balm for the hurts of life. I am as the vocal breath floating from an organ. I too shall fade on the winds, a cadence soon forgotten. So I dissolve and die, and am lost in the ears of men: the particles of my being twine in newer melodies, and from my one death arise a hundred lives. Why, through the thin partition of this consolation Pantheism can hear the groans of its neighbour, Pessimism. Better almost the black resignation which the fatalist draws from his own hopelessness, from the fierce kisses of misery that hiss against his tears."

from "Essay on Shelley."

In all his works, there is that inconsistent, incongruous attitude "Of mine own moods, or wailful or divine." His mystic music resounds with majestic tones of immortal verity, or deadens to dolorous notes of doom, the glorious hymn of seraphic triumph—the dismal lament of hopeless mortality. Yet, through all that varied existence in "the cumbered gutters of

humanity," or in that realm of exalted vision, in all the vagaries and vicissitudes of a tragic life, that indomitable, instinctive worship of all things beautiful lightens the depression of every sombre feeling, enriches the severity of every harsh expression. After all his soul was sure of her quest, for "beauty is truth" and truth is love and love is God.

In imagination we dare not attempt such an impossible thing as a classification by comparison. The greatest faculty of analysis, a function of the lower order of mind we denominate "reason," utterly fails at its approach to this highest reach of mentality. The sacred writers of Biblical times called this power "vision," the modern author names it "invention," the popular view accepts it as "illusion," but its highest form is surely intuition and revelation. With this rare gift alone we reach beyond the confines of sensuous being, and in such a state, whether acquirement or endowment, Thompson dwells in natural, voluntary activity.

However his imagination was not marked by the sublimity of Milton or Shelley. He did not work out great themes with all embracing conception. His mind was not a charmed palace

of celestial visions, but a miraculous woodland bower of flitting dreams. His are not the "broad sweep of angel cohorts through realms of spirit-space"; not the grand "triumph of mortal man o'er tyrannous doom." His fancy, rarified, unsubstantial, could grasp the exquisite raptures of a fleeting moment; could see "the invisibilities of imaginative color"; could hear the soundless strains of ethereal music; could perceive all transient hues, dissolving harmonies and fading forms. "The butterfly-sunset . . . alit on the swinging blossom," jewels that "shiver in lustrous throbbings," heavens "plashy with flying lightnings," "the grasses like an anchored smoke," "a grape-spurt, a vine-splash," "umbered juices and pulpèd oozes, Pappy out of the cherry-bruises," —what a "bacchic reel and revel" of voluptuous splendors! Such amazing wealth of exhaustless decoration, such lavish luxury of prodigal display, such sumptuous array of extravagant ornament, until our surfeited sense oppressed with the crush of sweetness, ceases to enjoy only to wonder.

The purest poetry, the most perfect expression of human thought, embodied in the Bible

more than any other extant form, uses figurative language as a vehicle of meaning, a manner of illustration, a means not an end. But Thompson's imagery is cultivated as "a thing of beauty," and is its own excuse for being. It is the olive-wreath, not the crowned hero,—the embellishments of the temple not the sanctuary of the statued god. His personification is so perpetual, so unremitting, that every form, color, element, object is given sudden and beautiful life, and moves and speaks and sings as thrilled with instant soul. This manner lends a strange, weird mysticism to his verse, a fitful glamour flushing softly o'er the sadness of his fate,—a rose-sky at day-fall.

His withered powers, weakened and wasted by disease and hardship, no more conjured up those visions of celestial beauty, those dreams of finite loveliness. His muse, wearied with her vigil, "cowered in the darkening chamber of his being," and pined away to utter silence. He soon became but "the vocal breath floating from an organ," "a cadence soon forgotten," "a cloud that hath out-wept its rain."

Yet, seeing how this marvelous mind transformed the barren earth of London lanes into

flowered meadows of Elysium, the gloom of coarse existence into the irised hues of heaven, the blight of sheerest misery into the ecstacy of angels,—surely there are none who would deny him the acknowledgement of mortal fame or the recompense of immortality. Nay, for such a soul we must believe the contrasts of earth and heaven complete, the balance of universal law perfected, the harmony of God fulfillled, in some

> *" . . . garden of enchanting . . .*
> *Swayless for my spirit's haunting,*
> *Thrice-threefold walled with emerald*
> *from our mortal mornings grey."*

Francis Thompson's Poetry.
An Essay

FRANCIS THOMPSON'S POETRY

In the poetry of the late-lamented Francis Thompson of London, there is the essence of a genius as strange as it is beautiful. It is strange because much of his immortal verse was written during his tragic, outcast life in London byways. It is beautiful because the ugly, disgusting features of the life around him had no influence whatever on the purity and dignity of his conceptions.

His mind was a magician's wand that turned all it touched to pure gold. Even his utter misery, both mental and physical, could scarcely tinge the brilliance of his vision, and the stain, though sombre, was illumined with rarest hues.

His most constant faculty was a voluntary, unconscious worship of beauty in all its forms. This power changed common weeds into gorgeous blossoms, turned the gloom of night into the solemn splendor of day, and even the sadder shadows of evening twilights into the irised glories of rosy sunsets. His fancy was a rich pallette of varied tints, not all sparkling with light, but many obscure with shadow.

Yet, what radiant pictures he has painted, what exalted dreams he has portrayed, what

strange scenes he has sketched on his word-canvas! True his subjects were often dictated by mere environment, and Thompson's life was not one of pleasant ease and cheery sunshine. But the low-grade ore of common sense-perception, treated in the glowing forge of his subtle ideality, issued as the purest gold free from the dross of coarser influences. In all his work there exists not one line of indelicate feeling—in fact not even of mean conception. All sense of form and outward things, drawn into the purifying realm of fancy arose again sweet and lovely, like hepaticas from the deadened leaves.

Thompson was nominally a Catholic, and much of his expression is tinged with religious feeling or rather adorned with religious analogy. But he, like Keats, was influenced by the Classic spirit, and the decorations of his verse are ancient rather than modern. His natural inclination was toward a mild pantheism. He saw a deity in the sunset, a naiad in the stream; the graces moved through his earthly realm, and the fates, alas, hovered about his sorrowful existence.

Though suffering the terrors of privation and want, the bitterness of his pain seldom sounded in his harmonious song. Only rarely, in "An

Anthem of Earth" or "Any Saint," the wretchedness of his life has crept into his verse,—the awful mental anguish, softened and assuaged by the beauty of an eternal hope however vague and uncertain. This is the strangest thing in the artist's life—that production of such exquisite beauty could flourish amid the rank growth of surrounding affliction and disaster.

His worship of the beautiful extended even to his acquaintances, and in the "Sister Songs" we have the most tender, sincere praise of womanly friendship in the language. Gratitude and appreciation, picturesque with sweet adornments and fervid with reverent feeling, breathes innocently and purely through those pathetic melodies. Apparently the kind friends who found and rescued him almost from the "cumbered gutters" of London slums, received all the affection of his amiable nature. We have no hint or knowledge that Thompson ever had a love-affair. This is a strange saying, for love is thought to be the burden of the poet's song, the inspiration of his work, the acme of his desire. Yet in all his production there is not a single love-lyric. But who has missed them, or who has wished his melodies and sentiments

varied so as to include what is at best a *usual* passion?

Thompson's imagination was fine, delicate, subtle. He did not reach the sublime heights of Shelley, or formulate the grand conceptions of Milton. He worked with all possible elements, but he cherished them for their individual beauty, nor combined them into great structures of towering magnificence. Yet his faculty was quick, rich, rarified—his fancies evanescent, filmy, fragile. He knew the fleeting phases of a rapturous moment; he saw the vague appearance of Nature's strangest passions; he grasped the pallid wonders of infinite seemings, and made them stay and change into palpable beings for our adoration. True, the high passions of the super-mind—the far, strange forces of discovery and revelation, that, in the absolute greatness of some souls, pierce even to the supernal, were not his native gift or cultivated acquirement. But his power of minute perception and discernment was delicate if not divine, deep if not universal, intense if not exalted.

The one poem that seems to contradict this judgment, that in itself is a complete and rounded conception, is "The Hound of

Heaven." This work is a single idea, universal in application and pursued to a finished form, steadily and surely, "with unperturbèd pace, deliberate speed," as the love of God followed the wayward soul to ultimate salvation. This is indeed one of the finest odes of our language, replete with deepest feeling, full of exquisite meaning, beautiful with rare decoration. It indicates a native power of grasp and insight that in some happier life than this tragic existence, might have developed into a wonderful faculty.

Considering the actual execution of detail, we find many strange inconsistencies, much deplorable negligence in the finished product. It seems that Thompson's work was somewhat determined by mere necessity; and yet he seldom humbles his genius to the menial task of writing an "occasional" poem—the lowest phase of any art. But there is such a rush and speed in his imagery, combined with the sheer inattention to revision and polish, that we wonder how the delicate creatures were dashed off at the urgent command of his inspiration.

Many of his longer poems show a sad lack of unity and symmetry. They were like his poetic life which ended ten years before his physical

death,—an existence dragging out to no purpose or result, long after his muse had departed from his forlorn being. He had no sense of completeness and little of congruity, the exception being that great master-work on Shelley, the most ornate "essay in criticism" in English. Many of his poems would have made three complete subjects. True, we get the full effect of all the weird beauties, crowding one upon another like magical forms and colors of a kaleidoscope; but the total result of the message—the impression of the mighty truth of perfect art, is sacrificed to a rambling, varied, straggling treatment, a musical theme with a dozen amazing variations.

Thompson's bodily existence, like his mental attitudes, was one-sided. No poet has shown such vagaries both of conception and execution; yet none has ever manifested such pure spontaneity. This is the conclusion of the whole matter, all faults of performance are explained by that one adjective—"spontaneous." His many virtues, too, were determined by the same tendency. Thus we have a rich, exuberant mass of pictures and images, adorned, intensified by the strangest epithets, the weirdest fancies, the sweetest analogies in any modern poet's work.

Language could not be more heavily laden with copious embellishment than this,—the very transplanting of a thousand lovely growths from the poet's teeming mind to the body of his elaborate verse. All the visions he saw, all the sentiments he felt arise with "majestic instancy" in numberless lights and shades, rushing, swarming into perfect expression with such bewildering rapidity, that the mind is crushed with sweetness, and sinks in utter satiety to silence and wonder.

Personification and metaphor, faithful and unremitting, marks this inspired lyracist's melodies more than any other trait. The sun is a god of mystery and power; Nature is a beautiful being dressed in a hundred mutable styles; a star is a cherub wandering in heaven's meadows; the poet's days are sun-starts on a stream; his melodies are broken stammer of the skies. Such miniatures of unsubstantial loveliness, such minute portrayals of subjective states, such word-paintings of fleeting forms and fancies were never so varied or numerous. Every allusion, comparison, setting, scene possible to the mind is conjured up by the unconscious faculty of figurative decoration.

In the pursuance of such imaginative delights Thompson has employed unpardonable rhymes, coined ill-sounding phrases, adopted daring conceits, chosen meaningless derivatives. This habit leads to considerable obscurity, and obscurity is allowable only in science and philosophy, not in lyric poetry. All these odd, impossible epithets and idioms are called forth by involuntary selection, influenced by a worship of the fantastic, the mystical, the lovely. This is the secret of the poet's existence—the ultimate *good* of *beauty*. No mind can contemplate such master-works, etherialized by pure exaltation, without a sensible effect, a conscious uplift toward higher things. This is true even if the beauty be chiefly sensuous as in Thompson and Keats, or spiritual as in Shelley and Wordsworth. The sensuous is the true but finite—the spiritual is the true and divine.

Thompson's grasp is intellectual, but his manner is objective. His message is not a magnificent appeal to universal man, his song is not a triumphant hymn to perfectionability. His ambitions were those of a faithful servitor of Nature, absolutely true to every whim and mood of his darling mistress, but not comprehending her as the embodiment of rarer visions of spiritualized creations.

To what heights his aspiration might have lifted him had his environment been less oppressive to those rarified, sensitive phases of his being, we can only regretfully conjecture. The hardships of terrible reality had racked his frail body and deadened his delicate sensibilities. He was sick with the struggle before his rescue came, he was worn out with inhuman endurance of a thousand ills. The fragile flower of that exalted spirit bent and broke in the miserable storms of material existence. But his last desire for rest was granted, and he knew "his little trouble was ended in a little peace,"—

"a sad musician of cherubic birth,
Playing to alien ears that did not prize
The uncomprehended music of the skies—
The exiled airs of her far Paradise."

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